DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 135 325 HE 008 696

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TITLE The Impact of Open University Access in Wisconsin.
INSTITUTION Wisconsin Univ., Oshkosh.
PUB DATE Nov 76
NOTE 17p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Achievement; *Admission Criteria; *College Admission; College Graduates; *Competitive Selection; Costs; Degrees (Titles); Economic Progress; Employment Opportunities; Followup Studies; *Futures (of Society); Graduate Surveys; Investigations; *Open Enrollment; Universities
IDENTIFIERS *University of Wisconsin Oshkosh; *Wisconsin

ABSTRACT

In an effort to find out the costs of more selective admission to the University of Wisconsin, UW-Oshkosh examined the progress of students who entered the university as freshmen in the 1960-61 academic year, when admission was relatively "open." Results showed that the state could save millions of dollars a year if it restricted admissions to students graduating in the top half or top three-quarters of their high school classes. If UW-Oshkosh had admitted students only in the top half of their classes between 1960 and 1975, Wisconsin would have lost over 780 college graduates, 245 of whom would have later earned graduate degrees. Most of them would not have been able to occupy the positions they now have or may have in the future, because they require college degrees. These projections are conservative, since they are based on the 1960 class size, while class sizes have increased. A more restricted admissions policy could have a significant impact on the economic and social development of the state. (Author/MSE)

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THE IMPACT OF OPEN UNIVERSITY ACCESS IN WISCONSIN

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HE008696

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November 1976

The question of "who should go to college" is one that has attracted the attention of educators, politicians and the general public for more than a century and which has assumed great contemporary significance because of two factors.

First, since World War II a college degree has become essential for access not only into the professions, but also into middle and upper level jobs in business and industry which once were open to high school graduates. Decisions about who should go to college are thus now decisions about who shall provide the political, social, economic and professional leadership of our country.

Second, for the past several years, fiscal support for public higher education has often not kept pace with needs created by additional enrollments. This has been particularly true in Wisconsin which has asked its university system to accept large numbers of additional students without providing additional resources. Generous public support of the university system in the past created a higher educational system of outstanding quality. When additional funding ceased, the university system was finally compelled to place enrollment limitations on all its campuses to protect against the erosion of that quality.

The increased social importance of collegiate education, and the current pressures caused by inadequate fiscal support, have led some to suggest that universities should become more selective so that only "qualified" students would be admitted. While "qualified" is usually not clearly defined it would be reasonable to assume that measures such as high school rank in class or scores on standardized tests are among the criteria that would be used for this purpose.

Although the 14 institutions of the UW System vary widely in their qualitative entrance requirements (four require high school graduation in the top one-half of their class, eight in the top three-quarters, and two have no high school rank requirements) enough exemptions exist to permit the enrollment each year of large numbers of students not meeting any selective rank-in-class standard. Those not meeting "standard" requirements can be given special consideration on the basis of veteran's status, being out of school for several years, being educationally or economically disadvantaged, by registering as a probationary student, or by taking courses through UW-Extension. While there is no accurate count of the number of such students, it is clear that if the university system became more selective or eliminated exceptions to its own standard requirements, or even required its two open admissions institutions (UW-Oshkosh and UW-Center System) to establish minimum requirements, the short term savings to the state of Wisconsin would minimally be measured in terms of millions of dollars per year.

But what would the costs be?

In an effort to find out, UW-Oshkosh examined the class of students entering the institution in the 1960-61 academic year. At that time, the institution required high school graduation in the top three-quarters of the class for admission, but then as now students were admitted who did not satisfy even this modest criterion.

This study analyzes data about what happened to those students. Following each section of analysis is a proposition -- a generalized statement which appears to be supported by the data and which is believed by the author to be equally applicable to students attending institutions in 1976.

HIGH SCHOOL RANK OF ADMITTED STUDENTS

There were 777 freshmen who entered UW-Oshkosh in the 1960-61 academic year. The distribution of students by rank in their high school graduating class, as shown in Table I, indicates that almost three-quarters of them had levels of high school achievement placing them in the top half of their graduating classes, and thus would probably have met the current entrance requirements of any institution in the UW System.

TABLE I

Distribution of Entering Freshman Students
by Quartile of High School Graduating Class, 1960-61

QUARTILE	N	PER CENT
Top	292	37.6%
Second	281	36.2
Third	150	19.3
Bottom	54	6.9
Total	777	100.0%

Although any student in the third quartile of the graduating class could have attended UWO, in fact relatively few chose to do so, and this group accounted for less than one-fifth of the freshmen. The smallest group consisted of students in the bottom quartile of their classes. Although eleven of these students were admitted on the basis of test scores or veteran's status, the others were merely admitted on probationary status and given no other special consideration.

These data lead to some interesting propositions about the effects of open admissions upon college freshman classes.

PROPOSITION 1. Open admissions does not lead to the enrollment of excessively large numbers of "unqualified" students.

Evidence for this proposition can be seen in the relatively small numbers of third quartile high school students who enrolled, even though there was no restriction upon their admission. Students in this third quartile were only about half as likely to enroll in the university as were students in the top half of the class.

Data concerning the enrollment of bottom quartile students also support this proposition, but cannot be considered as compelling because of the *de jure*, if not *de facto*, prohibition on such enrollments. Other data indicate that of all students in this quartile who applied for admission, however, fewer than a dozen were not accepted.

Whether one considers the "qualified" student to be one in the top half or the top three-quarters of the high school class, therefore, there is no basis for supposing that students not meeting these criteria will flood a university with an open admissions policy.

PROPOSITION 2. Common understandings about the nature of the university experience operate as an effective means of student selection even in the absence of specific admissions requirements.

One should not be surprised at the relatively few students from the bottom portions of their high school classes who will attend college even when such opportunities are presented. Poor performance in high school indicates a history of personal failure in educational pursuits

for many students; there is no incentive whatever for most of them to voluntarily subject themselves to an even more demanding educational experience in which the probabilities of failure may be even higher.

In addition, students with below average high school achievement are disproportionately characterized by low socio-economic status, and thus would be less likely than higher achieving students to be able to afford the economic costs of continuing their education.

One can assume, therefore, that low achieving high school students who eventually go to college have some unusual motivation that encourages them to do something that is not done by the vast majority of their peers. Whether this motivation is provided by parental pressure, some intrinsic vocational or educational interest not fully measured by their high school experience, a sudden desire for educational development based upon maturational factors, or some other cause, it serves as a self-selection mechanism that operates in lieu of a selective admissions policy. It also likely functions as a motivational force in college achievement as well, suggesting that students from the lower portions of their high school classes who choose to go to college are more able to successfully compete than would be students with identical high school records who decide not to attend.

HIGH SCHOOL RANK AND COLLEGE DEGREES

There are many indices of academic success in college. Probably the most useful is the graduation rate, because attainment of the college degree is often considered as indicating that the primary function of

the institution has been fulfilled. The numbers of degrees awarded to students, by high school graduating class quartile, is shown in Table II.

TABLE II

Distribution of Students Earning Baccalaureste Degrees by Quartile of High School Graduating Class, 1960-61

QUARTILE	TOTAL ENROLLMENT	TOTAL DEGREES	PER CENT DEGREES
Top	292	161	55.1%
Second	281	99	35.2
Third	150	39	26.0
Bottom	54	14	26.0
Total	777	313	40.3%

Although the total graduation rate reported in Table II is 40.3 per cent (which was probably close to the national average during the early 1960's), the rates differ by quartile. It is not surprising that students from the top quarter of their high school classes were more likely to receive degrees than were other students, although the fact that even in this group just slightly over half (55.1 per cent) met the definition of success indicates the effects of many non-intellectual, and often random, factors upon college persistence. Although not shown in the table, further analysis of these data indicates that among the highest achieving group -- students from the top ten per cent of their class -- the graduation rate was only slightly higher at 65 per cent.

What is surprising is that over a quarter of the students who entered from the bottom half of their classes also graduated. Indeed, it is interesting to note that (a) the graduation rates of students in the

bottom half of their classes are very close to those of students in the second quarter of the classes, and (b) that the graduation rates of students in the bottom quarter are identical to those from the third quarter.

> *PROPOSITION 3. It is impossible to develop a university admissions criterion so high that it will not admit some students who will be unsuccessful, and will not turn away some who would have been successful had they been admitted. There is no level of high school achievement so low that some students evidencing it cannot be successful in college.*

> *PROPOSITION 4. Although the college graduation rates of students in various quarters of the high school graduating class can be projected with great accuracy, there is no known way to predict which individuals in those groups will be successful.*

Propositions 3 and 4 are based on sound statistical principles and have been verified by countless field tests and experiments over many years. In direct terms, they state that, while most high school students graduating in the top five per cent of their class would earn a degree if they went to college, some small proportion of this group would not. In like fashion, some small proportion of students graduating in the bottom five per cent of their class would earn a degree if they went to college, even though most of them would not. Most important, no one can determine in advance which straight-A student will flunk out of college, and which D-minus almost-high-school-drop-out will earn a college degree. There is only one certain method to determine if students can do college work, and that is to let them try.

The question of establishing admissions policy is therefore basically an economic and political one, rather than an educational one. It requires a determination of how much the institution or the state is willing to spend to avoid the risk that numbers of potentially successful students are not given an opportunity to pursue a degree program. Under a system of open admissions many students are admitted who will not graduate, but the risk of rejecting potentially successful students is eliminated. As rank-in-class or any other criteria are increasingly raised so that only some students have access to higher education, fiscal costs decline, and the proportion of those who are successful after being admitted is likely to (but need not necessarily) increase. At the same time, increasing numbers of students who could have performed well are denied admission. This tradeoff of costs and risks is a matter clearly requiring that a decision be made as a matter of public policy.

> *PROPOSITION 5. The effectiveness of the high school rank-in-class criterion to discriminate between potentially successful and unsuccessful groups of college students decreases as the admission threshold is lowered, and this criterion probably provides no basis for preferring to admit third quarter students to bottom quarter students.*

Students in the third quartile of the high school graduating class were no more likely to earn a college degree than were students in the bottom quartile. Indeed, even the apparent difference
ating rates of students in the second and third quartiles of the class is not statistically significant. The implication of these data is that there is no sound basis for using quartile rank in high school

class as an admissions requirement except to distinguish students in the top quarter, when college graduation is used as the criterion of success.

OTHER MEASURES OF SUCCESS

Graduating rates are by no means the only measure of college success. Although they have the advantage of being simple, unambiguous, and appear valid on their face, at the same time they are unidimensional and fail to consider the degree to which the myriad of personal, vocational, intellectual and social goals of a college education have been achieved.

Perhaps the only available objective evidence related to any of these four goal areas is the use of level of grades earned by college students to measure intellectual achievement. It could be argued, for example, that even if a group of high ranking high school students might be no more likely to earn degrees than a group of low ranking high school students, they will earn higher college grades. To the extent that grades are considered a measure of how much has been learned, higher grades can be used as an indicator of greater college success.

Although this study could not conduct a thorough comparison of college grades, visual inspection of some records indicated that higher ranking high school students did in fact earn higher grades than their lower ranking counterparts. Translating this finding into a valid definition of success is difficult, however, since numerous studies

indicate that college grades are unrelated to future success in almost any area of professional or vocational endeavor.

There are no existing data to indicate whether there is a difference in the degree to which personal, vocational or social goals were related either to high school rank, or to college grades of these students.

Another possible measure of success can be considered to be the number of college credits earned by students. Although it is difficult to evaluate its effect, it is nevertheless true that most college students who do not graduate have still received some benefit from their collegiate experience. Overall, third quarter high school graduates who completed some courses but did not receive a UWO degree earned an average of 35 college credits while in attendance. Students from the bottom quarter of their high schools earned an average of 43 credits, even though they did not complete a degree program. It is likely that their educational experiences had some impact on their lives, although there is no evidence to confirm or deny this possibility.

TIME TO GRADUATE

The notion that students earn college degrees in four years is now understood by most educators to be incorrect. It may be surprising to learn that even in the early 1960's many students who received degrees required more than four years to do so. In the present study, 59 per cent of the degrees awarded to the class entering in 1960-61

were given within four years, and an additional 20 per cent in the fifth year. However, 15 per cent of all degrees were awarded between six and nine years after initial registration, and six per cent were awarded between 10 and 15 years after admission, the latest being given in 1975.

The relationship between high school rank in class and number of years required to complete the college degree is shown in Table III.

TABLE III
Per Cent of Students Earning Degrees in Various Time Periods After Initial Registration, by High School Rank

	Rank			
Yrs to Earn Degree	Top Quartile	Second Quartile	Third Quartile	Bottom Quartile
3-5	87.6%	78.6%	69.0%	21.4%
6-9	9.9	17.3	14.3	57.2
10-15	2.5	4.1	16.7	21.4
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

As Table III indicates, students in the top quarter of their high school class were more likely to graduate in three to five years than were other students. As students were considered in lower rank categories, they were more likely to have taken longer to complete their degrees. Although it was true that the graduation rates of students in the second, third and bottom quarters were not significantly different, the time required to earn the degree significantly increased for each group.

The date upon which graduation data are collected thus is a critical variable in studies of this nature. The closer to the traditional four-year date graduation data are collected, the greater the probability that the graduates will proportionately overrepresent students in the top of their high school classes, and underrepresent students from the bottom.

THE SUCCESS OF COLLEGE GRADUATES

Defining success in terms of degrees or credits earned focuses upon academic achievement. When graduates leave the institution, however, they are more often judged on the basis of their personal and professional accomplishments.

If UWO had implemented a selective admissions policy in 1960-61, many students who attended and received baccalaureate degrees would not have been admitted. Did their degrees make a difference in their lives? Did the college experience which would have been closed to them provide them with something of value? To find out, a brief questionnaire was sent to each of the 53 students who entered UWO in 1960-61 from the bottom half of their high school classes, and who graduated from the institution.

The 33 students returning the questionnaires, and two students whose present status was on file in the alumni office, provided information on 66 per cent of these graduates. The response rate and answers to each item on the questionnaire were almost identical for students from the bottom quarter and second quarter of their high school

classes, so both groups were combined to analyze the data. A summary of their responses is shown in Table IV.

TABLE IV

Summary of Responses in 1976
of University Graduates Entering in 1960-61
From the Bottom Half of Their High School Classes

Presently employed?	Yes	91%
	No, but looking	0
	No, but not looking	9
Degree required for job?	Yes	80%
	No	20
Job related to college major?	Yes	74%
	No	17
	Unsure	9
Graduate work completed?	No	23%
	Some	46
	Received graduate degree	31

Of the entire group, 91 per cent are now employed full time, and nine per cent are unemployed and not looking for work. All respondents in this latter group had been employed on a full-time basis subsequent to their graduation. The jobs which the students have are for the most part related to their college major (74 per cent) and in general required a college degree as a condition of employment (80 per cent).

The respondents' present positions represent many different professional and vocational choices, ranging from some with no specific preparatory requirements, such as retailer, to others which are highly

specialized or technical in nature. Examples of this latter category include audit manager, counselor, college professor, chemist, virologist, attorney, social worker and teacher.

It is striking that only 23 per cent of the respondents had taken no graduate courses after receiving their degrees, while 46 per cent had taken graduate courses and an astonishing 31 per cent had earned graduate degrees. This means that three of every four students from the lower half of their high school classes who received baccalaureate degrees had gone on to some form of graduate school experience. Degrees earned included the Ph.D. and J.D. as well as master's degrees in education, business and the liberal arts.

The respondents also indicated that their university experience had helped them to achieve their occupational goals (64 per cent rated the university "excellent" or "good" in this regard, and 36 per cent rated it "satisfactory"; none rated it "fair" or "poor"). Students were equally strong in their belief that the university experience had helped them to reach personal goals of value to them, with 67 per cent indicating that their experience was "excellent" or "good."

CAN WISCONSIN AFFORD OPEN ADMISSIONS?

Wisconsin could save millions of dollars a year if it restricted university admissions to students graduating in the top half, or even the top three-quarters of their high school classes. Based upon the data collected in this study, it is possible in a general way to indicate the long term costs of such a decision. If UW-Oshkosh had admitted only students in the top half of their classes between 1960 and 1975,

Wisconsin would have lost over 780 college graduates, 245 of whom would have gone on to earn graduate degrees. Most of these persons would not have been able to occupy the positions they now have or may have in the future, because they require college degrees. Even a policy restricting admission to students in the top three-quarters of their high school class would have denied college degrees to 210 persons during this same period.

These projections are extremely conservative, because they assume that freshman classes have remained the same size since 1960 when in fact they have more than doubled, and that the proportion of college students from the lower half of their classes has not changed when it has probably increased slightly over this period. When these data, which were collected on only one campus, are multiplied by the large pool of students on all UW campuses who entered with the same qualifications, it is clear that many thousands of college graduates are involved.

Even these conservative estimates indicate the significant impact that a more restrictive admissions policy could have on the economic and social development of Wisconsin. Whether Wisconsin can afford to make its university system accessible to all students must therefore be considered in terms, not only if its financial costs, but of its benefits as well. When all factors are fully considered, it is likely that the evidence will clearly indicate not only that Wisconsin *can* afford open admissions but indeed that it cannot afford to do otherwise.